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ABSTRACT

Research indicates that students' activities and relationships with their parents predict grades more surely than parental education, family income, ethnicity, sex, and family structure. Children with extremely permissive parents do not do well and children with extremely authoritarian parents do worse. Inconsistent parenting is even more strongly associated with lower grades. Authoritative parenting is associated with good grades for both sexes across the high school years for all ethnic groups, family structures, and levels of parental education studied. Family emphasis on conformity is correlated with a decline in grades, while emphasis on diversity is correlated with an improvement. Higher levels of television viewing are associated with slightly lower grades. Particularly among younger high school students, an after-school job has a slightly negative effect on grades. Studying with friends is associated with higher grades, while hanging out, partying, and talking on the telephone are associated with lower grades. The more hours girls spend on sports and exercise, the higher the grades they receive. The same is true of boys, excepting the most active participants in sports and exercise. Youth influenced by peer values more than by parental values are likely to have lower grades than students primarily influenced by values learned at home. (RH)

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Helping Your Kid Make the Grade

Sandy Dornbusch

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Adapted from the article of the same title, originally published in the Summer 1986 issue of *The Stanford Magazine*.

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A chance conversation over a glass of wine has dominated my life for the past two years.

In 1984, I casually mentioned at a meeting of school superintendents and principals that high school students from single-parent households and from families containing a stepparent were not working as hard as students from intact families. As the group relaxed later over some wine, Sam Johnson, principal of Capuchino High School in San Mateo, cornered me. He urged me to abandon my current research and to concentrate instead on the families of students. He dealt with family problems every day on the job, so he knew how important the family was; yet there was little information to guide him and his staff when parents asked them how they could help their kids in school.

There is a huge literature in sociology that relates school performance to parents' education, income, and ethnic background. Sam Johnson was suggesting that *family structure* might also help predict how well a student will do in high school. But, I thought, even if we were to find that this was true, wouldn't we end up telling people things they couldn't do much about?

"We already know that increased parental education brings better school performance," I told myself. "Do we seriously expect parents to go back to school? If we find children of divorce don't do as well in high school, do we want unhappily married couples to stick together so that their children might have higher grades a decade later?"

In the end, my colleagues and I did look into the role the family plays in education, and we

found out something that has powerful implications: Students' activities and relationships with their parents predict grades more surely than do all the other indicators — parental education, family income, ethnicity, gender, and family structure — put together. And while those other factors are difficult, if not downright impossible, to change, it *is* possible (though difficult) for a family — any family — to change its approach and thereby improve student performance in high school.

THERE ARE NO TYPICAL FAMILIES

The need for a clearer understanding of family interactions can best be appreciated against the backdrop of changes now taking place within the American family. In 1950, about 1 child in 10 lived in a single-parent family. Today it's 1 in 5. And by 1990, nearly 1 in 2 will have spent some time in a single-parent household by the age of 18.

Despite *Kramer vs. Kramer*, about 85 percent of all single parents are women. The rise in single-parent families has thus contributed greatly to the feminization of poverty. Today, about half of all poor families in the United States are headed by a woman with no spouse present.

People who are divorced haven't given up on the institution of marriage, though. Forty percent of all marriages involve a ghost at the wedding, as at least one partner was previously married.

Indeed, a divorced person is more likely to marry within a given time period — typically

two to three years until remarriage — than someone who has never been married. (The eighteenth-century English pundit Dr. Samuel Johnson, having observed this phenomenon, called it "the triumph of hope over experience.") These frequent remarriages produce new forms of households in which children by previous marriages have to deal with a new parent and new siblings.

Stepfamilies, which make up an increasing proportion of modern American families, face special problems. Here's an example: It appears that stepparents often distance themselves from child-rearing decisions; but if you ask a stepchild if he or she would like the stepparent to participate more actively, the answer is likely to be resounding no!

If we had some idea of which parenting approaches are associated with better grades, we might be able to suggest alternative ways for moms and dads to relate to their children and to the school. Then *all* parents — the less well-educated, single, step-, minority, and poorer parents as well as the better-off parents — could at least be aware of family patterns that go along with greater success in school.

The measure of a child's success that we used in our study was Old Faithful itself: high school grades. The average of numerous grades across diverse teachers and classes seemed to be a reasonably good indicator — and, importantly, an accessible one — of academic performance.

We collected survey data from nearly 8,000

students in six San Francisco Bay Area schools and from about 300 teachers. In addition, about 3,500 parents answered a mail questionnaire.

We already knew that some kids performed well regardless of their parents' education, income, or ethnicity. A key question we set out to answer was: All things being equal, what family patterns appear to pay off in the form of better grades?

PLAY IT AS IT LAYS

Let us begin by looking at the influence of family circumstances upon grades. Even though people can do little to alter their history, this provides a backdrop against which we can assess the importance of family interactions. Similarly, we can ask whether each factor — parental education or ethnicity, to name a couple — continues to be associated with higher or lower grades once we have taken these family interactions into account.

It comes as no great shock that children's grades somewhat reflect the amount of education their parents received. Ethnic differences are also influential, although not as much. Asians are the highest-performing group, followed by non-Hispanic whites, then blacks and Hispanics. As a rule, it looks like children from single-parent households, as well as stepchildren, don't do as well as children from intact households.

Because such factors as ethnicity and parental education *do* have an association with grades, we have to make sure that the family patterns that might affect grades are not just "going

along for the ride" with one of these major factors — that they do, on their own, influence grades.

For example, income, if it could be separated from other factors, would not be a good predictor of grades. Higher income *is* associated with higher grades, but that's because family income is highly correlated with levels of parental education, itself a *strong* predictor of student performance.

We were surprised when we looked at the language spoken in the homes of Asian, Hispanic, foreign-born black, and foreign-born non-Hispanic white students. We found that these students tend to work harder and do better in school if a language other than English is spoken at home. Why? Are immigrant Asian children, who are doing extraordinarily well in school, just naturally bright?

Probably not. But they are diligent. Speaking only English in the home may be an indirect measure of assimilation; assimilated kids may be picking up the norms of their American friends, with resulting lower levels of effort in high school. I find this negative commentary on American standards quite unsettling.

GIVE AND TAKE

Let us now turn to parental approaches, an area in which our findings may actually be of use to individual families as well as to schools. Our first finding surprised me: The degree of parental participation in such school functions as Open School Nights, regardless of parents' own

educational attainment, is strongly linked to grades.

One could argue that parental participation is a good measure of underlying values. On the other hand, a cynic might say that kids whose parents are in close contact with teachers and school officials get special treatment. When parents are perceived as active, it may be harder to assign their child to an unpopular course, or to a general or vocational track instead of an academic one. Meanwhile, the kid whose parents are perceived by school personnel as inactive is more likely to be dumped into the class with the teacher everyone wants to avoid.

The parents we talked to had another explanation: They suggested that their participation may help them to understand better the world their children face in school.

We do know that most parents — even parents who don't attend these school functions — care very much about the education of their children. Perhaps educators should consider ways of making it easier for parents, especially single parents, to attend school functions — for instance, by shifting PTA meeting times from working hours to nighttime, and by providing child care. Maybe we should stress to parents the importance of coming to school events and activities, urging them to make a little extra effort to show up even for seemingly insignificant occasions.

One subject we studied extensively is the impact of parents' reactions to good and poor grades. Turning a blind eye to the child's grades is not helpful. Yelling at kids about poor grades doesn't seem to work, either. In fact, when the

parent and the child are both upset, we see not only poor grades, but a tendency for grades to get worse.

Another parental technique that may hurt more than it helps is the use of extrinsic rewards and punishments. When parents use cars, curfew hours, or restrictions on activities to lure, bribe, and threaten their children, the kids tend to be less internally motivated toward schoolwork and more concerned with these carrots and sticks.

This finding supports earlier findings by Stanford psychologist Mark Lepper that there is a "cost" to rewards: The student is being encouraged to care about use of the car or what time to be home, not about schoolwork per se.

Well, then, what does work?

Encouragement helps. Kids who get better grades tend to have parents who praise, encourage, and offer to help them. More to the point, such low-key positive responses go along with *improvement* in grades over time.

The only failure of this approach comes when student grades are very low to begin with. For really poor performance, no parental response seems to make much difference. Here parents should seek out a sympathetic teacher, counselor, or administrator to develop a school-family partnership.

Giving a son or daughter sole decision-making power too soon — sooner, at least, than is typical in the community — has an adverse relationship to high school grades. Parents' making all the decisions *longer* than is typical also goes with lower grades. It is when parents and children put their heads together to decide

jointly about a young person's affairs that we see higher grades.

PARENTS, PEERS, AND PERFORMANCE

P. Herbert Leiderman of the Stanford Department of Psychiatry helped us to adapt to our needs a classification scheme, developed by another researcher in the 1960s, in which parenting styles may be divided into three categories: authoritarian, authoritative, and permissive.

- *Authoritarian* parents demand obedience and are not responsive to the child. " 'Shut up,' he explained," as the writer Ring Lardner once put it.
- *Permissive* parents make few demands for mature behavior. "He's just going through another phase," they will smile, as Johnny's fist goes through another face.
- *Authoritative* parents set clear standards and enforce rules firmly, but they also encourage discussion and the child's independence, feeling that "every member of the family should have some say."

The results of our study are clear. Kids with extremely permissive parents don't do so well; kids with extremely authoritarian parents do even worse. And inconsistent parenting — vacillating from one style to another — is even more strongly associated with lower grades than is either authoritarian or permissive parenting.

Authoritative parenting, on the other hand, is linked with good grades.

The relation of the three parenting styles to grades was the same for both males and females

at every age examined, and more or less applies to all ethnic groups, family structures, and levels of parental education.

Authoritative Parenting Works Best

Parental Style	*Average Grades**
Pure Authoritative	3.1
Authoritative + Permissive	2.9
Pure Permissive	2.7
Authoritative + Authoritarian	2.7
Pure Authoritarian	2.6
Permissive + Authoritarian	2.5
All Three	2.4

*based on a 4.0 scale

Steve Chaffee of the Stanford Department of Communication has developed measures of family communication as reported by the child. Applying Chaffee's measures to a group of 2,000 students whose grades were examined over a two-year period, we found that family emphasis on conformity (epitomized by the refrain, "When you're my age, you'll understand") is correlated with a decline in grades, while emphasis on diversity ("Our kids know more about some things than we do!") is correlated with an improvement in grades.

What about students' after-school activities?

Aided by Don Roberts of the Department of Communication, we found that more television viewing is associated with slightly lower grades. Even those who claim to be watching "only to learn" get lower grades if they watch a lot, but

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the kids who fare the worst in school are the ones who watch TV because "there's nothing better to do." Regardless of the reason, those who stare at the television more get slightly lower grades than those who leave it off.

An after-school job may build character and bank accounts, but it does have a slightly negative effect on grades, particularly among younger high school students.

Activities and School Performance

Type of Activity	*Hours Spent Per Week*	
	0-9	10 or more
	*Average Grades**	
Hanging Out	2.9	2.6
Partying	2.9	2.3
Watching Television	2.8	2.7
Working for Pay	2.8	2.6
Talking on the Telephone	2.8	2.5
Doing Schoolwork	2.6	3.1

*based on a 4.0 scale

Studying with friends is associated with higher grades, while hanging out, partying, and talking on the telephone are associated with lower grades. This may reflect differing values: Friends who study together support the importance of school, whereas the socializers may denigrate it.

Sports participation is hard to classify, since sports may mean free play or a highly organized activity. But the findings are interesting. The more hours girls spent on sports and exercise, the higher the grades they received. The same

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applies to boys — up to a point. Among the most active male sports and exercise participants — those who are at it more than 30 hours a week — grades are lower. For these "pre-professional athletes," school is apparently subordinated to sports.

When there is a battle between parental values and peer values, students who are more influenced by their peers are likely to have lower grades. Students who engage in more adult-supported or adult-controlled activities tend to have slightly higher grades.

WHAT THE HEADLINES DON'T TELL YOU

Before we leave the subject, there are some caveats, deficiencies, and gaps that need explaining.

Although we do have data on the trend in grades for 2,000 students over a two-year period as well as records of family histories, almost all our information concerns a relatively recent period. It would be much better if we could track the ongoing progress of each student over the long haul, enabling us to examine changes in family interactions, student behavior, and school performance.

As it is, we cannot always tell the chicken from the egg and must settle for educated guesses about cause and effect. We can only report *associations* between family interactions and grades. These interactions may be the *result* of the grades, they may directly *influence* the grades — or they may, along with grades, be the product of some outside factor.

In addition, we are reporting results for *groups* of persons — merely tendencies and probabilities, not definitive results for individuals. As Tolstoy wrote, "All happy families resemble one another; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own fashion." All we can do is to trace resemblances. Certainly we cannot provide advice for individual families. Not only is each family unique, but each beast or angel among its children responds differently to treatment that appears similar. The best we can hope for is to expand the horizons of parents and educators, indicating to them which approaches may work better.

Finally, parents are only one of the influences upon children, albeit a crucial one. We have a duty to try our best to help our kids, but the final outcome depends on more than parental efforts. The adolescent makes some choices, and those choices are influenced by other forces outside the family. How much of *your* life was affected by the influence of close friends, by role models portrayed in the media, by great historical events like depression and war, or by blind chance? Parenting does not always get the result it deserves. On earth, if not in heaven, the correlation between virtue and reward is positive but low.

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